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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HAVANA 000248

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SUBJECT: WORLD FOOD PROGRAM FIGHTS ANEMIA, WANTS SATELLITE
IN CUBA

REF: HAVANA 78

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Classified By: COM Jonathan Farrar for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The World Food Program (WFP) is working to fight anemia and provide emergency assistance to hurricane victims in Cuba. Although Cuba is food insecure (importing 80 percent of its food), few Cubans suffer from malnutrition, according to the WFP country director. However, anemia caused by iron deficiency affects approximately one million Cubans. WFP provides direct food assistance and is working to upgrade a domestic plant that should soon be able to produce a cereal fortified with iron and other minerals. The UN system in Cuba is seeking funds from Spain to further this effort. Government of Cuba (GOC) cooperation with WFP's emergency operation to provide food storage and direct food assistance to people affected by last year's three powerful hurricanes has been slow, bureaucratic, and expensive. To improve its general operations, WFP requested USINT assistance with an application to import and operate a VSAT from a U.S.-based company. End Summary.

ONE MILLION SUFFER FROM ANEMIA

¶2. (SBU) On April 16, World Food Program country director Sonsoles Ruedas called on the Chief of Mission (COM) to discuss WFP's program in Cuba. WFP's primary focus is to support the Cuban National Plan for the Prevention and Control of Anemia. GOC studies demonstrate that the prevalence of anemia in Cuba's eastern region is more than 40 percent, affecting mostly children and pregnant women. The goal of the National Plan, in line with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG), is to reduce that rate to 15 percent by 2015. Ruedas called anemia the "only important health problem" in Cuba. Ruedas said the main problem in Cuba is dietary, i.e. not how much food but what food is consumed. The USD 11.5 million WFP project seeks to affect

the Cuban diet through supporting mineral enriched cereals to improve the eating habits of households in the eastern provinces of Las Tunas, Granma, Holguin, Santiago de Cuba, and Guantanamo. This program intends to reach 254,600 children from 6 months to 3 years old and 214,000 children 4 to 5 years old for a period of five years.

13. (U) The Cuban ministries involved in the WFP program include the Ministry of Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation (MINVEC) in charge of overall coordination; the Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP) responsible for implementation and evaluation of the communication strategy, regulating the corn-soya blend imported and produced locally, and general food and nutrition oversight; the Ministry of Food Industry (MINAL) responsible for producing the fortified food; the Ministry of Domestic Trade (MINCIN) responsible for distributing the food; and the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) to facilitate the implementation of the communication strategy and publicize methods for cooking and storing the corn-soya blend.

14. (U) In the short term, WFP is importing a corn and soy based cereal fortified with iron, zinc, and calcium for free distribution through a network of government run local stores or bodegas. The corn-soya blend is a mixture of cornmeal, soy flour, and soybean oil fortified with vitamins and minerals. To advertise the benefits of this product, WFP has enlisted Cuban 2008 Olympic gold medalist Dayron Robles as a spokesperson. WFP is also producing (i.e. paying for) local television programs showing mothers cooking with the corn-soya blend, including in a number of local dishes. The blend is also commonly added to milk and sweetened.

15. (U) More long term, WFP is helping the GOC modernize the Lactose Bayamo (formerly Nestle) plant. WFP is providing

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technical expertise and installing an extruder (from Switzerland) required to fortify the corn-soya blend with additional minerals. Ruedas said the Cubans should be able to produce the blend locally by August of this year. Initially, WFP will buy the soya blend from the Cuban factory, then give it back to the Cubans for distribution through the bodegas. This arrangement is expected to continue until 2012 when the plan is for the GOC to have sufficiently increased their portion of the acquisitions to continue the program on their own.

16. (U) In addition to the WFP project, the UN system in Cuba has applied for a USD 9.4 million grant from Spain's MDG Achievement Fund to target anemia in pregnant women and children under five years old. The focus is on increasing and diversifying the production of local agricultural and industrial products rich in micronutrients, in particular iron. The proposal also improves the distribution and marketing of such products to targeted populations and strengthens surveillance and monitoring mechanisms for food, nutrition, and anemia. The UN system will also work with MINVEC, MINSAP, and MINAL, but also link with the Ministry of Agriculture (MINAG) and Institute for Food Nutrition and Hygiene (INHA). This would be the first project funded by Spain's MDG Achievement Fund in Cuba. To date, the UN's concept paper has been approved and it is in the process of writing up the detailed program for final approval. The UN System also applied for a grant from the same fund for a private sector development project, of which Ruedas did not have much information because WFP is not part of the proposal.

17. (C) Ruedas lamented that the number one priority identified by the GOC for the Spanish funded UN project, if approved, is the modernization of a plant in Pinar del Rio "for some reason." She said that the new Minister of Food Industry Maria del Carmen Concepcion Gonzalez is the wife of First Vice President Jose Ramon Machado Ventura and has significant influence in these projects. She is from Pinar del Rio, which also explains why Machado Ventura has spent a

lot of time lately in that province touting the questionable progress of the post-hurricane recovery, according to Ruedas.

HURRICANE EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE

18. (SBU) Ruedas, originally from Spain, arrived in Cuba from her previous post in South Africa in August 2008, six days before the first of three hurricanes tore through Cuba. WFP underwent two emergency operations in Cuba: first to support around 86,000 victims of hurricane Gustav in Isla de Juventud through general food distribution; and second to address the food requirements of 1,078,000 beneficiaries through targeted general food distribution for six months from October 2008 to March 2009. This second operation focused on the most affected provinces of Isla de la Juventud, Pinar del Rio, Camaguey, Las Tunas, Holguin, and Guantanamo. In addition to direct distribution through the government ration system of beans, rice, vegetable oil, canned fish, and a corn-soya blend, WFP provided temporary food storage facilities and a supply of liquid gas stoves for community kitchens for food preparation.

19. (C) Ruedas said WFP has mobilized funding for 70 percent of the USD 5.7 million required for these post-hurricane operations, noting several times that WFP was "unable" to accept U.S. offers of assistance. She does not expect to receive any more funding and WFP has nearly distributed all of its assistance. Ruedas complained that the GOC refused WFP offers to assist with the internal transport and delivery of emergency assistance. The Government of Cuba said it could handle it themselves, "but they can't." Ruedas said that MINVEC's subsidiary company Donation Administration Enterprise (EMED) responsible for processing the import, handling, and distribution of donations nationwide was extremely ineffective. (EMED was created in 2002 to organize the donation delivery process working with the Cuban Civil Aviation Institute, Customs, the Ministry of Transportation,

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the Ministry of Revolutionary Armed Forces, and provincial authorities.) Examples of EMED's "slow, bureaucratic, and expensive" work include: WFP air lifted protein fortified biscuits at great expense only for EMED to let them sit on the tarmac for ten days; EMED sent containers of canned fish intended for Isla de Juventud to Pinar del Rio by mistake. Ruedas said she was going to push to use the much more effective Cuban Civil Defense distribution network in any future emergency assistance scenario.

NO SIGNS OF AG REFORMS

110. (C) When asked if she had seen any signs of improvement in agricultural production after several minor GOC reforms, Ruedas said that Cuban agricultural policy still did not make much sense to her. For example, the GOC has donated 2,500 tons of sugar to WFP for programs in Colombia and North Korea, while at the same time Cuba imports sugar for domestic consumption from Colombia. Regarding the much publicized GOC program to lease idle land to private and state farmers (reftel), Ruedas said that any progress has been slow and bureaucratic. She reiterated what we have heard from several contacts, that the right to access the land is useless without the inputs necessary to work it.

Satellite Connections

111. (C) Ruedas ended our conversation by handing the COM a letter seeking USINT support for the WFP's goal to import and operate a very small aperture terminal (VSAT) through U.S. based Emerging Markets Communications (EMC). Currently, UNDP

is the only UN agency that operates a VSAT in Cuba using Norway-based operator Telenor. WFP is reliant on the extremely slow, expensive, and unreliable Cuban communications system for phone and internet service. The VSAT would allow WFP to link to headquarters-based applications and provide a backup communications channel during natural disasters. The Cuban Ministry of Informatics and Communications has granted WFP a license to operate a VSAT in Havana. EMC and WFP are still in the process of preparing their U.S. licensing applications.

COMMENT

112. (C) Ruedas was very frank regarding her critiques of the Cuban Government, especially in delivering emergency hurricane assistance. She also admitted that because Cuba does not suffer from malnutrition per se, one will have to be creative to think of a role for WFP after the conclusion of the anemia program in 2012. The pending Spanish grants will boost UN inroads with Cuba's most expansive health issue and create additional links between Cuba and the Spanish government. Licensing issues are the one area in which the UN system in Cuba is not shy to request or receive U.S. assistance. We urge the Department to support the upcoming WFP request to import and operate a VSAT system as both practical support for the humanitarian work WFP is doing in Cuba and an example of how the U.S. telecommunications sector can penetrate the Cuban market.

FARRAR